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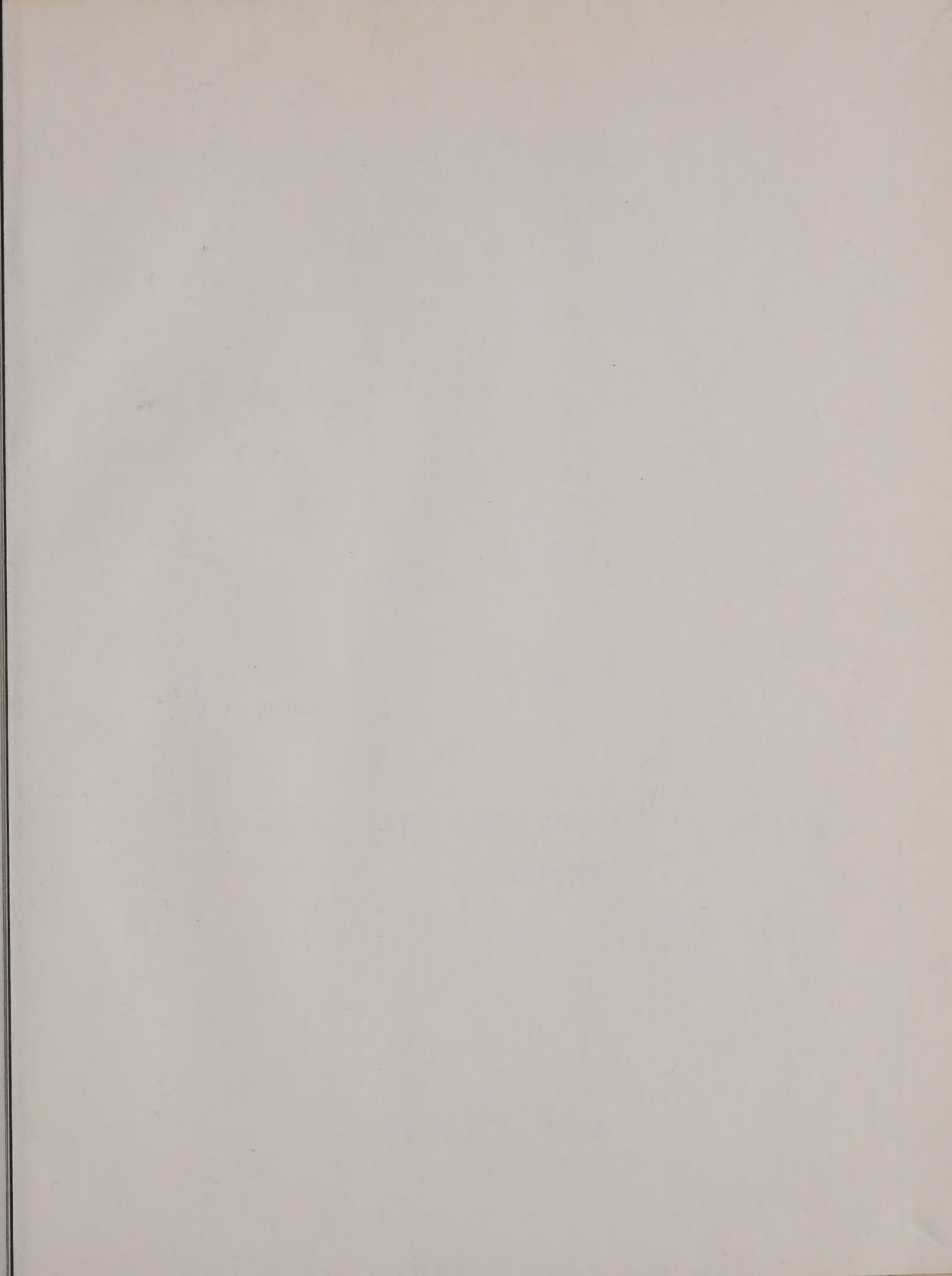
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The imaginative leadership of Reuben Gold Thwaites in building the Wisconsin Historical Society into a leading historical agency in the United States is the theme of the 1963 Burton Lecture. Clifford L. Lord's story of Thwaites and his society is both interesting and instructive. Dr. Lord is indeed a most qualified commentator on this topic, for he too served for many years as director of the Wisconsin society before becoming dean of the School of General Studies at Columbia University.

Dean Lord discusses his subject against the broad background of American history, particularly the stirring years of the Progressive Movement. This study of the historical society of the past is not only good history, but offers a clear challenge to the historical society of today.

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Gift '64
Clifford Lord

REUBEN GOLD THWAITES
AND THE
PROGRESSIVE HISTORICAL SOCIETY

by Clifford Lord

Fifty years ago, on Saturday, October 18, 1913, Reuben Gold Thwaites, dynamic and popular superintendent of the State Historical Society of Wisconsin, closed his desk and prepared to go home. The annual meeting was scheduled for Thursday but everything was already in order for the event.

Thwaites could reflect with considerable satisfaction on the state of the Society. Twenty-six years earlier he had succeeded Lyman Copeland Draper as secretary. In the intervening years, the library had been more than trebled in size, the collecting of manuscripts had been systematized, and attention had been directed for the first time to both Wisconsin manuscripts and Wisconsin newspapers - to the latter with the help of the Wisconsin Press Association. The legislature had made the Society the official depository of the state archives, and important state records had flowed to the Society until space ran out. The museum had been transformed from a cabinet of curiosities into a modern instrument of public education, and people from school age to late adulthood had been encouraged by a variety of ploys to visit it frequently. He had even experimented with sending special exhibits to schools throughout the state as to national expositions. He had reissued the first ten volumes of the Society's *Collections* and had edited an additional ten volumes himself. To observe the fiftieth anniversary of the Civil War, he had persuaded the Legislature

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1880

to establish a War History Commission, of which he had become secretary, in order to publish a series of works, both primary and secondary, on Wisconsin in the war. The Society had acquired its first historic site and had begun the agitation for the restoration of the Territorial Capitol which would bear fruit eleven years later. He had encouraged and helped establish the first local historical societies as auxiliaries of the state society and had seen them begin preserving important sites, erecting markers, gathering local records and reminiscences, developing local historical museums.

Wisconsin was, as never before, interested in its history and working at it. As he had foreseen, the Legislature had responded to that interest and beginning in 1907 had increased the state appropriations handsomely. Now the annual appropriation stood at \$36,000, where it had been but \$8,000 when he took office.¹ Private donors had also responded to the broad appeal of the activities he had successfully initiated, and private fund income had risen during his tenure from \$904.61 to \$7,152.98.²

He had focussed attention for the first time on the many ethnic groups in the state, had secured their cooperation in varying degrees for a data-gathering survey, and had been rewarded with several articles and one book-length manuscript on individual groups. He had persuaded the Sons of the American Revolution to finance the publication of three volumes of Draper manuscripts. He had helped the Federation of Womens Clubs set up study programs on Wisconsin history and launch a substantial marker program. He had captured the wholehearted cooperation of the state Archeological Society by naming its key officer, Charles E. Brown, director of the Historical Society's museum. Another large group of markers had resulted. The influence of the Society was felt as never before across the State.

1. 1887 *Proceedings*, Wisconsin Hist. Soc. p. 7; 1913 *Proceedings*, p. 23.

2. 1887 *Proceedings*, Wisconsin Hist. Soc. p. 10; 1913 *Proceedings*, p. 52-54.

Above all there was that handsome building in which he was sitting, then the finest historical society and one of the finest library facilities in the country. Careful and intricate maneuvers had brought the Society's fine library, then many times the size of that of the University's, to the University campus in 1900. The deal had been elaborate, with Society and University making a joint approach to the Legislature to secure for the Society, on land which the University turned back to the State for the purpose, a building which would be jointly occupied until the University could secure its own library building. And just three and a half years after the Society moved into its fine new State Street quarters, the wing it had previously occupied in the old Capitol was gutted by fire. By such a narrow chronological margin had the collections, the priceless library, the Draper manuscripts been spared certain destruction. Luck had been with the Society on that occasion and frequently during the past quarter century. Things had gone particularly well in the last fifteen years; it was Thwaites who had made them go the way they did.

He was only 60, but recognition had already come in many forms. One of the outstanding historical editors of his generation, he had seen 170 volumes to press. To the 73 volumes of the *Jesuit Relations* and the 32 volumes of the *Early Western Travels*, he had added the eight volumes of the *Original Journals of the Lewis and Clark Expedition*, 26 volumes of *Society Proceedings*, 10 volumes of *Society Collections*, 10 volumes of the War History Commission, 12 other titles.³ In addition he had written 15 books, including the semi-centennial history of the University of Wisconsin and volumes for the American Nation Series, the Epochs of American History, and (with Louise Phelps Kellogg) the American Commonwealth Series. Two professions

3. For bibliography of Thwaites' writings, see F. J. Turner: *Reuben Gold Thwaites - A Memorial Address*, pp. 63-94. To these totals should be added at least 81 published addresses, articles, pamphlets and reports, 70 SHSW *Bulletins of Information* and 7 SHSW *Handbooks*.

had given him their highest honors. He had been president of the American Library Association, a member of its council, a life member of the honorific American Library Institute. Though he had opposed (as unnecessary) the organization of the Mississippi Valley Historical Association, he had been elected one of its early (1912-13) presidents. He had been active in several major projects of the American Historical Association, particularly the European transcripts program and the Conference of Historical Societies, of which he was the real founder and which later became the American Association for State and Local History. He had received a well-earned LL.D. from the University of Wisconsin, and - presumably a mark of self-satisfaction - had begun his autobiography.

He locked the office door, turned into the west corridor of the second floor, down the handsome marble stairway, out the door to State Street. It was for the last time. The following evening he fell ill. Three days later, October 22, 1913, he died.

Two months later (December 19) a memorial service was held in the new state Capitol. The Assembly Chamber was crowded. Governor Francis E. McGovern was in the chair. Members of the Supreme Court, the University Board of Regents, the Society Board of Curators, staff, faculty and friends, filled the seats and the galleries. The main speaker was Thwaites' close - perhaps closest - friend, Frederick Jackson Turner, returned from Harvard to pay heartfelt tribute to his old colleague. Turner, with a perception almost unique among their colleagues and friends, put his finger on Thwaites' great contribution: "Thwaites was," he said, "the builder of a new type of state historical society."⁴ A year before he had written to Fred-eric Paxson, "To a degree that can hardly yet be recognized, he (Thwaites) has changed the conception of the western

4. Turner, *Reuben Gold Thwaites, A Memorial Address*, (Madison, 1914, p. 58.)

(historical) society."⁵ Here lies Reuben Gold Thwaites' major claim to fame, for fifty years all but forgotten.

What was this new conception? Very simply it was that the historical society, like the public library, the museum, the art gallery, is an instrument of public education; that service to scholarship alone - important and valuable as it was and is, and basic as it was and is to the purposes of the society - is not enough: that the modern society should encourage the amateur and acquaint the broadest possible public with the values of local history and heritage. This, to Thwaites, was a necessary - not an extraneous or luxury - function of the historical society in a democracy becoming ever more democratic.

The available statistics are revealing. A recent survey by the American Association for State and Local History⁶ indicates that there are now more than 1750 historical societies in the country. They are located in all 50 states, numerous regions, most counties, many cities and a number of hamlets. They enlist at least 542,000 dues paying adult members, plus thousands of junior historians, volunteers and affiliates. The value of their real estate holdings is in the nine-figure bracket. Their budgets amount to some \$14,000,000 a year, not including the quarters, custodial care and utilities furnished gratis by many counties and municipalities. Many of their libraries, whose holdings in books and pamphlets alone total over 10,000,000 titles, rank among the significant research libraries of the country. Several report manuscript collections of several million pieces each. Over 1,000 societies operate museums which attract some 9,000,000 visitors a year. Over 500 societies maintain historic sites; 88 publish journals;

5. Turner to Paxson, Feb. 19, 1912, in State Historical Society Archives 27/1/3, Administration, Genl. Correspondence, 1914-1030, Box 70.

6. C. M. Silvestro and R. D. Williams, *A Look at Ourselves*, Madison, Wisc., 1962; and the mimeographed compilation of statistics of the survey on which the published summary was based (distributed to members of the Council of the Association, Autumn, 1961).

56 issue books more than occasionally; 19 serve as the archives of their state; 14 supervise state-wide marker programs, and many more their own local programs; 10 have statewide junior historians programs and many more circulate museum materials to the local (or regional, or state) schools. Still more participate regularly in radio and television broadcasts.

Eighty-three years earlier (1876), the United States Bureau of Education, taking a long look at the United States at the centennial of Independence, reported less than 160 historical societies with 27,244 members, and libraries totalling over 1,000,000 books and pamphlets, 88,771 pieces and 1361 volumes of manuscripts. They had published the equivalent of 300 volumes of 350 pages each. Maryland and Virginia housed their States' important records, a number of societies had museums and art galleries.⁷ The difference in number of activities between 1876 and 1949 is as significant as the difference in the number of organizations.

And just eighty-five years earlier (1791), the whole movement began when the Rev. Jeremy Belknap, sparked by an exchange of views with John Pintard who later founded the New-York Historical Society, called together a group of his friends and launched the Massachusetts Historical Society, "for the purpose of collecting, preserving and communicating the Antiquities of America," including both the "natural and political history of America from the earliest times to the present day."⁸ The program encompassed not only the gathering of materials for the library and the cabinet of curiosities, but the preparation of papers and the editing and publishing of collections of documents and papers the better to communicate knowledge to others.

7. *Public Libraries in the United States of America. Their History, Condition and Management*, Dept. of the Interior, Bureau of Education, Washington, D. C. 1876, 11. 312-315.

8. Belknap's "Plan of an Antiquarian Society" is reproduced in facsimile in Massachusetts Historical Society *Collections*, 5th series, vol. 3, facing p. 231.

Massachusetts set the pattern for the historical society for almost a century. East or west of the Appalachians, the form and content, allowing for modest differences, was basically the same.

The Society which Thwaites took over from Lyman Copeland Draper in 1887 largely followed this pattern. There were differences, of course. In Massachusetts, membership has always been numerically restricted; in Wisconsin it was always open to those interested - but in both societies, a candidate for membership had to be formally proposed by a member or members and formally elected, and in both the membership was small and for operating purposes restricted to the base city - Boston or Madison. In Massachusetts, there were no dues, merely occasional (rare) assessments. In Wisconsin, dues were payable annually, but a number of years went by with no attempts at collection. And in Wisconsin, first of the states to recognize the importance of its historical society with an annual appropriation, time and energy was spent by both secretary and key board members tending legislative fences which may have been spent in Massachusetts (certainly in later years) in comparable and probably equally arduous efforts to keep the till stocked with funds.

The historical society of those days, like so many aspects of American society, was operated as a gentleman's club. A small group of citizens - often the same people - frequently ran the historical societies, the churches, the hospitals, the pre-Carnegie libraries, and, particularly in the smaller communities, the school boards and the town government. This was the accepted and usually acceptable pattern of many operations in what was still a substantially stratified society. The America of the second half of the 19th century was full of opportunity, on frontier and seaboard alike. Compared to western Europe, democracy was far advanced. But egalitarianism was far more typical of the frontier than of the seaboard, where society was by no means as classless as it is becoming today. The present-day historical society has a worrisomely limited appeal to the technician and the worker. A century ago it had none, and very little for any but a small cultured and social élite.

But with the turn of the century came one of the six great periods of democratic advancement in this nation: the Progressive Era. Highest among its hallmarks was a burgeoning faith in the perfectability of mankind through education. High school attendance jumped precipitately. College attendance rose. The public library, aided by the Carnegie benefactions, assumed new importance in informal public education. The Chautauqua idea was widely accepted and utilized. The Social Gospel came to the fore.

The burgeoning economy, buttressed by the nearly completed network of railroads, the huge supply of cheap labor flooding into the country from abroad, the proliferation of capital and the rise of the large corporation; the greater democracy of the initiative, referendum, recall and short ballot; the growing effectiveness of craft unions; the rising protests against the unfair use of economics and political power, against trusts and malefactors of great wealth, against political manipulation and the boss, all made this period, despite its manifest contradictions and its opposing stresses, one of great progress for the little man, roughly comparable to the period of the New Deal and the era in which we are now living.

Progressivism was particularly potent in Wisconsin. As Robert LaFollette, Sr., called the resources of the state university into the service of the state government, University President Charles Van Hise was proclaiming the boundaries of the campus to be the borders of the state, reviving extension services, introducing correspondence study. Politically Progressivism under LaFollette, Davidson and McGovern, brought the direct primary, a stiff corrupt practices act, civil service, vocational education, the effective regulation of railroads and utilities, minimum wages for women, safety laws and workmen's compensation.

This was the heady atmosphere in which Thwaites operated. He was a creature of Progressivism and, particularly but not exclusively in Wisconsin, one of the shapers of the educational segment of its development. The great interest of this editor of historical documents, this head of

a great research library, became the education of the "masses," the educationally underprivileged.

One key agency of public education was the public library. Thwaites became an active organizer of the citizen committees essential to qualify towns for Carnegie library grants. Frequently, he was the main speaker at the dedication of the resulting buildings. He was a founder and lifetime member of the Wisconsin Free Library Commission, which brought new standards and new services - and later state aid - to Wisconsin libraries. A great believer in the interchange of ideas through meetings of like-minded people beset with similar problems, he was a founder and one-time president of the Wisconsin Library Association.

An equally important agency in public education in Thwaites' eyes, as in the progressive historical society today, was the museum. No longer a mere cabinet of curiosities, under the theories effectively advocated in the 1890s by G. Brown Goode of the Smithsonian its exhibits should tell the story of foreign lands and peoples, of natural phenomena, of the flora and fauna of an area, or of local history. Such exhibits unquestionably were of a lower intellectual order, Thwaites acknowledged, than the reference book in the library, but he saw the museum showcase as more attractive and conceivably more stimulating to the common man. As early as 1891, he was talking of the "excellent missionary work" the museum could do among the "masses."⁹

When he finally secured the funds to modernize the museum at Madison, he not only saw to it that the exhibits were reorganized to educate, but that all possible means of attracting adults and school groups to the museum were utilized. Convention delegates and wives were sought, school attendance solicited by mail and personal lecture. Philatelists were given special attention. The Madison Art Association was encouraged to hold its exhibits in the Society

9. State Historical Society of Wisconsin, *Proceedings*, Dec. 1891, p. 66.

galleries. Exhibits were frequently changed. Special exhibits - as many as 20 a year - were timed for special anniversaries or the visits to Madison of special groups. Then, modern exhibit techniques were introduced. Circulating exhibits to the schools were initiated. Annual attendance - with travel a bit more difficult than today - soon reached the 100,000 mark. He also encouraged the local historical societies, which he was bringing into being in Wisconsin, to start their own museums, using space in the local library or courthouse, if possible, until they could afford their own buildings.

These local societies, for which there were many eastern precedents, especially in New England, he saw as a means of enlisting more people in the important work of collecting manuscripts, securing reminiscences, writing and publishing local history, as well as creating their own local museums. He actively sponsored their establishment in Wisconsin as arms or auxiliaries (unlike New England) of the State Society, beginning in Green Bay and Ripon. The Legislature authorized their incorporation and the expenditure of municipal tax monies for local museums.¹⁰ Bulletins of Information were published for their guidance, and he cheerfully travelled the state - or sent staff representatives - to attend their meetings.

The progressive historical society, unless others have already monopolized the field, is apt to be involved in marking and preserving historic sites. In markers, originating in New England during the centennial of Independence and in California shortly thereafter, Thwaites saw another means of public education, a way of spreading and perpetuating knowledge about the places where history had happened. Not only did he encourage the state and local societies to erect markers, but he stimulated the establishment of the Landmarks Committee of the Federation of Womens Clubs to undertake an extensive program in this field. He got the Wisconsin Archeological Society to mark

10. Chapters 111, 118, *misc.* (Session) *Laws of 1897.*

archeological sites, while encouraging its survey, mapping, excavating and publishing activities.

Markers were inexpensive. The preservation and restoration of sites and historic buildings were of a different financial magnitude. Such tasks could not be undertaken until the affluence of the economy made possible, through either private or public sources, the substantial expenditures involved. Wisconsin was still short of that stage of wealth-and-interest, yet beginnings were made. Thwaites was well aware that sites and buildings were also of a higher magnitude of potential educational value than markers. Not even the historical museum could so effectively recreate the aura of times and events long past. Beginning in the mid-19th century, the east - specifically New York State with the Hasbrouck House (1837), Tennessee with the Hermitage (1856) and private enthusiasts and philanthropists at Mt. Vernon (1860), had led the way in saving American historic sites for posterity. Under Thwaites, the Wisconsin Society acquired its first historic site, that of the blockhouse of a militia fort of the Black Hawk War with a magnificent view commanding the countryside from Madison on the east to the Sinsinawa Mounds on the west, half the width of the state. If launched, with the Federation of Womens Clubs, a campaign for the preservation of the Territorial Capitol, and saw the first local society preserve and restore the oldest house in the state, a pre-Revolutionary battle structure at Green Bay. A second Society preserved the schoolhouse in which Alvin Bovay denominated the Republican Party at Ripon, while still another preserved a large Indian Mound.

The progressive society with its interest in education has often worked closely with the schools. Thwaites saw local history offering the school teacher a laboratory in the social studies, with course materials immediately at hand. For the semi-centennial of statehood in 1898 - cut short by the outbreak of the Spanish-American War - Thwaites hoped for the widespread participation of the schools in essay contests, exhibits and collecting programs. The Legislature established a special commission, headed by

the Superintendent of Public Instruction, and the school children were given their assignments, completing more work than the adult segment of the population before the war practically ended the observance.

The progressive society generally works fully with other groups on educational programs, especially where history is concerned. The revival of University extension, the establishment by the Free Library Commission of a state-wide circulating system of books and pamphlets, and Thwaites' good relations with the Federation of Womens Clubs led quite naturally to the establishment of a study program within the Federation. Materials and a study outline prepared by Louise Phelps Kellogg (research associate of the Society and first, and to date, only woman president of the Mississippi Valley Historical Association) were supplied by the Society to the Free Library Commission to circulate to the womens groups around the state.

Pageants, adapted to American use and popularized by Laredo Taft and soon to be brought to new levels of practicability in Wisconsin by Ethel Rockwell, and other observances of anniversaries of events of historical significance were further means of attracting substantial public interest, of stimulating and educating the "masses," and of enlisting in a local historical activity - and perhaps in a lasting interest in local history - people without previous competence in the field. Thwaites travelled the state to encourage such observances.

The progressive society is usually eager for a large general membership representative of a cross-section of the population, not for mere numbers, but in order to reach regularly and intimately the largest possible number of those interested in history, to have them ready to stand and be counted, ready to support the good work. Also it seeks a governing board responsive to public interest in the field, but dedicated, as trustees of such an institution must be, to history and its highest standards. With the people of Wisconsin, through the La Follette period and organization, vigorously expressing their independence of political machines and their right to participate in decision-making at

all levels of government; with travel becoming easier though by no means easy; and with the Society largely dependent upon the Legislature for its sustenance, it was natural that Thwaites should forsake his predecessor's lack of interest in members outside Madison. He sought a state-wide membership, soon had more members in Milwaukee than Madison. Instead of a Board all of whose key members were residents of Madison, he secured a Board with strong state-wide representation and key members well distributed geographically. And he experimented with notable success in holding the annual meeting in various cities around the state.

The progressive society presupposes that with widespread citizen interest and participation in its program of public education, gifts in cash and kind will flow as never before to its collections and its coffers. This certainly proved to be the case in Wisconsin under Thwaites. The Legislature took its time--10 years. But beginning in 1907, it began to respond handsomely to his requests, knowing, as it did, the increasing number of people back home in each legislative district interested in and working in behalf of the Society or its many related activities. The annual appropriation rose rapidly. The museum was provided for for the first time. And a by now sorely needed addition to the building was authorized (1911). The collections grew at an unprecedented pace, both in library and museum. And benefactions became numerous. All but one of the Society's major bequests were made during Thwaites' administration, though the income of the largest did not become available until some years after his death. Proverbially, nothing succeeds like success. No one ever proved this better in the historical society field than Thwaites.

In behalf of his concepts, Thwaites travelled not only Wisconsin but the country with something of the "missionary zeal" he demanded of his staff. Quite literally from Maine to California, he preached the values of the public library, the museum, public education and local history to audiences which sought his well known platform skill. In convention after convention of his peers, among librarians

and historians alike, he worked to spread his ideas. And spread they did. His contemporaries in historical societies watched the publications of the Wisconsin Society for new departures; they sought him out at conventions to pick his brains and to tap his latest enthusiasms. Especially through the meetings of the Conference of Historical Societies did he reach his peers, particularly those of the mid-western societies, where his practices and concepts took quick root.

As early as 1900, Thwaites could rightly boast, "This Society [has] moved away from its traditional moorings as an exclusive, almost an aristocratic retreat for the learned alone, and carried on its work of self-popularization... More and more is the Society commending itself as a practical assistant to intellectual activity among all classes."¹¹ At that point, he had not yet entered the field of historic sites, study programs, school exhibits or pageants and had barely started on markers and local societies. His museum program existed on paper only.

When he died thirteen years later, the distance the Wisconsin society had travelled from its traditional moorings was infinitely greater. He had by then evolved something new in historical societies, something that had already achieved considerable influence in the mid-west, and something which since his death has spread across the country until today hardly a society exists which in some degree has not felt and been influenced by his often anonymous impact.

Thwaites' ideal did not quite match that of the "complete" modern society. The emancipation of women had not yet advanced sufficiently to bring them into anything like the position they occupy in the modern historical society. The automobile - which proved not to be the incentive towards Socialism which Woodrow Wilson had feared - was in its infancy and the mobility so essential to the modern

11. State Historical Society of Wisconsin, *Proceedings*, 1899, p. 9.

development of the historic site and the historical celebration was not yet with us. The use of radio, television and the self-contained mobile exhibit as vehicles of public education still lay in the future. So did the marked increase in human longevity which has influenced the modern development of the historical society as it has influenced all western society. But the Thwaites concept was remarkably close to the late twentieth century ideal of the progressive historical society.

Reuben Gold Thwaites shunned personal publicity. The academic community has on the whole been hostile to the attention to the amateur which the progressive concept demands. These two factors, coupled with the fact that his two immediate successors were academic scholars (the first of whom perforce did and the second of whom perchance did not feel the compulsive thrust of the Thwaites tradition), have conspired to obscure his key role in the evolution of the American historical society. It is time to cast aside the cloak of anonymity which for fifty years -- since Turner's address -- has shrouded the debt every one of us in the historical society movement owes to the dynamic, eclectic and imaginative introduction by Thwaites of popular education as a primary responsibility of the historical society. It is time to recognize Reuben Gold Thwaites for what he was: not only the distinguished historical editor and once influential librarian, but the man who wedded progressivism to the historical society, the father of the institution we know today.

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